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ABSTRACT

While construction of early childhood education curricula requires the use of educational and developmental theories, significant differences between the two domains exist. Whereas educational theories are particularistic and maximalist, developmental theories are universalist and minimalist. Developmental theory views change in individuals as being a result of multiple influences, while educational theory looks essentially on the influence of practice on individuals. One type of theory can inform the other, but one cannot be derived from the other. Knowledge of child development can help educators understand what young children are capable of knowing, how children come to know what they know, and how they know that what they know is true. But what young children need to know is not solely determined by what certain children are capable of knowing; it is also determined by what society thinks it is important for children to know. Goals of early childhood education, which are largely unstated, should be made explicit. Efforts to make these goals explicit will be helped by analysis of early childhood education programs that result from traditions different from the American mainstream. Teachers' theories of appropriate practices influence ways in which curricula are implemented. (RH)

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EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM CONSTRUCTION AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM CONSTRUCTION AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE [1]

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The construction of early childhood education curriculum requires the use of both educational theories and child development theories. It was the creation of the child study movement with the work of G. Stanley Hall, starting in the 1890s, that established the close association of early childhood education and child development began. The founding of the field of child development as a scientific discipline and of the progressive education movement, with its focus on the child's reconstruction of knowledge, helped to fuse the two fields (Weber, 1984). This represented a major shift in the development of early childhood education curricula as they came to be embedded in particular developmental theories, rather than in theories of knowledge (Spodek, 1988).

Child Development and the Early Childhood Curriculum

Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) discuss the three ideologies that characterized Western education. These also characterize developmental theories. The romantic ideology reflects the work of Rousseau, Froebel, Gesell, Freud and others who viewed development as maturation and education as the unfolding of inner virtues and abilities. The cultural transmission ideology conceives of education as passing the knowledge, skills, values and social and moral rules from one generation to the next. Behaviorism provides the psychological principles for a technology of education within this stream. The progressive ideology views education as helping the child achieve higher levels of development as a result of structured, though natural interactions with the physical and social environment. The idea of education as the attainment of higher levels of development reflects this relationship between human development and education that has resulted in a conception of the teacher as a child development specialist. This ideology is consistent with a constructivist conception of development based upon Piaget's work.

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[1] Paper presented at the 1988 Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

This confounding of early childhood education with child development may result from a lack of distinction that seems to characterize the field between developmental theory and educational theory. There is a significant difference between development and education and between developmental theory and educational theory. Fein and Schwartz (1982) have clarified the difference, suggesting that theories of development are universalistic and minimalist. They describe what is considered a normal course of growth and change within an environment with a minimal core of features. In contrast, educational theories are particularistic and maximalist, dealing with practice related to particular individuals in specific settings aimed maximizing the benefits of deliberate interventions. In addition, developmental theory views change in the individual as a result of multiple influences, while educational theory looks essentially on the influence of practice on individuals. Although one type of theory can inform the other, one cannot be derived from the other. Evidence that these theories are not the same is found in the multiplicity of early childhood curricula that identify with particular developmental theories. Forman and Fosnot (1982), for example, have analyzed distinct early childhood curriculum, all of which are labeled "Piagetian" by their developers; others exist as well. In fact, although developmental theory can be viewed as a resource to the early childhood curriculum, it is inappropriate to conceive of it as its source (Spodek, 1973b). Biber (1984) suggests that the starting place for an educational program "should be a value statement of what children ought to be and become" (p. 303).

In addition, Bijou states that applied behavior analysis, often used in programs for handicapped, as well as normal children, determines a method of instruction but offers no key to the nature of curriculum content. Thus, no matter what the developmental theory with which a program identifies, the issue of content must still be addressed.

The Content of Early Childhood Programs

The process of educating young children is closely related to their level of development. Knowledge of child development can help educators understand what young children are capable of knowing, how children come to know what they know at a particular stage in their development, as well as how they come to know that what they know is true (how they validate their knowledge). What young children need to know is not solely determined by what certain children are capable of knowing. It also is determined by what society thinks is important for children to know. These goals of early childhood education need to be made explicit.

The need to articulate the content of early childhood education reflects a need to articulate the content of education at all levels. The National Endowment for the Humanities h[illegible] recently issued a report criticizing elementary and secondary

schools for being too involved with "process" and not involved enough with helping children and youth become deeply knowledgeable of the roots of our culture (Cheney, 1987). This criticism might also be applied to early childhood education programs. Educators need to define the content of early child education as something more that a set of skills that will enable children to function adequately and meet the demands of the primary-grade curriculum.

Defining the content of early childhood education does not require that all children learn the same thing or that there be a single standard early childhood curriculum. Indeed, there are many ways that the content of an early childhood curriculum can be identified and its appropriateness justified.

It is helpful to look at different early childhood education programs that result from different traditions from our own to see other possibilities. These alternative programs need not serve as models of ideal education. Rather they can help us reflect on early childhood education from a different vantage point. China has a very different early childhood program than our own; analyzing a study of Jewish early childhood education programs in America provides a second alternative.

Kindergartens in China. Education in the People's Republic of China was significantly influenced by Soviet educational practice at every level in the 1950s. This influence continues, though relations with the Soviet Union have not been close for some time. As a result of this influence kindergarten programs found in China before Liberation in 1949, which were based on the American progressive education model, were replaced by a model based on the Soviet kindergarten. It should be noted that these kindergartens serve children ages three through six and serve as both nursery schools, child care centers and kindergartens.

The Chinese kindergarten curriculum contains six areas of learning: music, language, mathematics, physical education, art, and general knowledge (a combination of science and social studies). In addition to the formal curriculum, opportunities for play are provided (Lu, 1987). Since Chinese kindergartens also function as child care centers, meals, snacks, health inspections, naps, and informal activities are included in the daily program.

The six areas of the curriculum are taught through formal lessons. Three- to four-year-olds have one or two lessons a day of about 15 minutes duration, 4- to 5-year-olds have two 20 to 25 minute lessons, and 5- to 6-year-olds have two to three 25-30 minute lessons each day. (Kindergartens, like all schools and businesses in China, operate 6 days a week). The lessons are taught through direct instruction, with teachers lecturing to children, often using teacher-made teaching aids to illustrate

the concepts presented and to maintain the children's interest. The children remain attentive and well behaved during these lessons, sitting around tables, often with their hands behind their backs. After the teacher's presentations, time is provided for the children to participate in related activities (Spodek, in press).

The Chinese early childhood educators' concern that their programs be developmentally appropriate is expressed by not placing undue stress on the children. Their program, however, is based on the subjects that are taught rather than on developmental theory. The source of the kindergarten curriculum is the same as that of later school curricula. Kindergarten lessons, while simpler and designed to be more interesting to young children, are no different in kind from those offered to older children and youth.

Although the lessons taught in Chinese kindergartens are academic, they also represent a form of socialization. Children are socialized into the life of the school. The academic work of the kindergarten provides children with a basis of common knowledge that represents the foundation for later studies. In addition, the children also learn to function properly as students in a school. The socialization experience is equally important as the content of the lessons.

American Jewish Early Childhood Programs. A very different approach to determining early childhood curriculum is suggested by Feinberg (1988) who studied the curriculum choices of Jewish nursery schools and kindergartens. Rather than identify the areas of development to be enhanced in these schools, she looked at what Jewish early childhood educators want children to know, searching within traditional Jewish knowledge for the source of an early childhood Jewish curriculum. The areas she identified included Bible Study, The Jewish Way of Life, the Hebrew Language, Israel, Jewish Peoplehood, Faith in God, and Jewish Values and Attitudes.

The American Jewish early childhood schools with which Feinberg was concerned serve a particular sub-population in our nation, and with traditions, values and other cultural elements different from those of the majority culture. Since these programs value different learnings from those valued in non-Jewish early childhood programs, the content of these programs is also different. Of course, there is also much content in common with other American early childhood schools since there is much that both groups commonly value.

The Jewish early childhood programs Feinberg studied are very much concerned with socializing children into a culture - in this case, a minority American culture. The curriculum that young Jewish children should learn in these schools is neces-

sarily made explicit, since it is doubtful that this knowledge could be transmitted through the many informal interactions the children have in their lives or through their contacts with the mass media or with other community agencies. Although this curriculum emphasizes socialization, it is also rich in content. There is much that children are expected to learn - the roots of Jewish culture - and the programs that are developed are designed to transmit that culture in a way that is developmentally appropriate and thus capable of being learned by the children.

American Early Childhood Programs. It is obvious that the curriculum constructs of Chinese kindergartens are different from those of American kindergartens. Each program is based on a different theoretical orientation with different standards for what constitutes appropriate early childhood education activities. But what about the differences between the American Jewish early childhood programs and secular American programs? The teachers and program developers in these Jewish early childhood schools hold the same theoretical orientation as do those in non-Jewish American schools. The preparation of teachers in American Jewish early childhood programs is similar to that of other American early childhood teachers, as are their views of development, education, and learning. Because sectarian Jewish early childhood programs serve different cultural needs than do secular American programs and are based in a culture that is not reflected in everyday American life, the content of these programs must be made explicit.

In reality, one can find a parallel content to Feinberg's categories of knowledge in traditional American early childhood programs. However, the knowledge transmitted in most American programs is implicit; it is often not discussed or studied. Standard American early childhood programs teach about the American way of life, about the English language, about America, about American peoplehood, and about American values and attitudes, parallel topics to those identified for Jewish programs.

The day-to-day curriculum experiences offered in early childhood programs relate to the American way of life. The knowledge we want young children to acquire is embedded in the books we read to them, the stories we tell, the songs we sing, the experiences we offer, and the relations we nurture among children and between children and adults.

One of the most important elements of all early childhood programs is language. Literacy education for young children is being viewed as increasing significance. However, literacy skills are only part of the language learnings provided to young children. We teach about American language to both bilingual and monolingual children. We also share rich oral and written traditions of children's literature and poetry, folk stories, and fairy tales. Many of the holidays we celebrate with children in

school -- from Columbus Day, to Thanksgiving day, to President's Day to Martin Luther King Day, and so on -- relate to American history and American traditions. These are celebrated in school to instill a sense of American peoplehood. These celebrations and the learnings related to them help all children, whatever the cultural background and cultural heritage, develop a sense of belonging to the American culture, while not necessarily denying their own. It is as if each child's own forebears had celebrated that first New England Thanksgiving, no matter when they or their ancestors actually arrived on our shore (Spodek, 1982). These elements are not absent from early childhood programs. They are an implicit part of it. However, because they are unarticulated, they are unstudied.

Explicating the Early Childhood Curriculum

Making the content of early childhood education programs more explicit does not make it less developmentally appropriate. These two characteristics of programs are not mutually exclusive. Judging programs on the basis of developmental appropriateness alone, however, is not enough. In addition to developmental appropriateness, the values of our culture and the nature of the knowledge children need to gain should determine the content of kindergarten programs (Spodek, 1986).

Some early childhood educators are attempting to make program content more explicit. Elkind (in press), for example, has recently addressed the issue of what to teach in early childhood education. He suggests that early childhood teachers should begin to teach young children the content, the concepts, and classification of the different disciplines such as science, social studies, and history. Young children should also be taught different colors, shapes and sizes, learning to match, categorize, discriminate and order things according to the similarities and differences of their attributes.

Elkind also addresses the issue of how to teach, suggesting that the most appropriate way of doing this for young children is through projects. Elkind's suggestion of an appropriate early childhood teaching method is similar to that of the progressive kindergartens of the first quarter of the twentieth century (Weber, 1984). As progressive education influenced early childhood education programs then, these programs changed. Froebel's games and materials were modified, and new activities to help children better understand their physical and social environment were introduced. Children explored the world immediately accessible to them, the "here and now," representing that world in their play, in their construction, in their art products, and in the stories and discussions they shared. Because the world that children experienced was an organic one -- not organized by subjects or categories -- units or projects, which integrate subject knowledge around themes or experiences, became the vehicle for educating young children.

Elkind's suggestion needs more elaboration before being implemented. Although it requires rethinking the assumptions underlying current early childhood educational curricula and changing how early childhood educators design programs for young children, his suggestion has its basis in the traditions of the field.

Programs that develop from such suggestions will be consistent with those suggested in the book, New Directions in the Kindergarten (Robison & Spodek, 1965). This book, written more than two decades ago, proposed that kindergarten curricula be based on key ideas or concepts from various fields of knowledge. These key ideas could be used to test the intellectual worth of kindergarten content. Activities that would be integrated into units or projects, would be designed to be developmentally appropriate.

Early childhood educators do not have to make a choice between providing content-rich programs, as suggested here, and socializing children into the school and into the culture while providing a preparation for later schooling. Nor is there a conflict between programs that are responsive to children's developing understandings and abilities and programs that emphasize cultural knowledge and academic scholarship.

From Curriculum Theory to Classroom Practice

It would be comforting for curriculum developers to believe that the development of a curriculum theory and the elaboration of a document prescribing or suggesting classroom practice would be implemented directly as the curriculum developer envisioned. In fact, this is not the case. Different teachers interpret curriculum prescriptions in different ways. The evaluation of the Planned Variations program in Head Start and Follow Through documented the variety in implementations of each program model. This evaluation also showed great variability of outcomes from one implementation to the next which were attributed to "site effects," that is variations within each model. Other studies of program implementation show the resistance of teachers and schools to change (Sarason).

It is not the case that teachers do not understand the intent of particular program models, or that they are incapable of implementing programs. Rather, teachers bring a completely different set of theories to the classroom than do curriculum developers. These implicit theories of teachers, called teacher beliefs, curriculum constructs, influence how teachers perceive classroom situations and interpret the educational setting. They also include a set of values about what teachers and children ought to in school and what children ought to learn (Spodek, 1988a). Somehow these theories must be integrated along with educational theories and developmental theories in creating educational models for young children.

Conclusions

In designing early childhood education programs for children in contemporary American society, early childhood educators need to reconsider the assumptions that they hold about the filed. The knowledge base of early childhood programs also needs to be made more explicit. In doing this, these programs would become appropriate for today's children.

Parents and teachers should not be misled by the false dichotomy between a socialization program and an academic one. Socialization is a continuous process, within the society at large and within each social institution or social group. Young children need socialization experiences just as all students do. However, the socialization of young children in early childhood programs includes learning the student role, learning the importance of academic learning, and learning basic literacy and mathematical skills. Being socialized does not mean learning to follow teachers' directions, to be quiet and compliant. It should mean becoming an independent seeker of knowledge and a creative thinker.

If kindergartens are to improve, educators must make explicit what is being taught and why. Educators can design programs that help socialize children, prepare them for later school learning, and that teach significant content. Kindergarten programs need to be evaluated, not only in terms of their developmental appropriateness, but also in relation to their educational worth, to the children taught and the communities served. Only when that content becomes public can it be evaluated as to its effectiveness, its worth, and its practicality.

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